

Blue Ribbon Fire Commission
Jan. 7, 2004
Comments of Bruce Turbeville, Chairman, California Fire
Safe Council

Thank you Mr. Chairman, esteemed members, for the opportunity to share with you the perspective of your customers – the non-uniformed, everyday Joes who rely on fire protection services.

I'm Bruce Turbeville, Chairman of the California Fire Safe Council.

For 37 years, I was with the California Department of Forestry & Fire Protection. Ten years ago, CDF formed the California Fire Safe Council as a means to help support the department's shrinking education budget by enlisting the monetary and in-kind support of the private sector.

We believe we've been very successful. The Council is independent of CDF. We're a nonprofit organization with multiple funders. We sit on the California Fire Alliance. The Alliance is made up of California's fire and land management agencies and its mission is to eliminate the bureaucratic barriers to pre-fire management. We help form local Fire Safe Councils and there are more than 100 in California. We bring diverse and often opposing interests to the table, from the corporate, government and citizen levels. And under our umbrella, these groups agree

about one thing – whatever we're doing to stop wildfires from damaging our communities, we need to do it better.

We are the statewide umbrella organization that supports community fire safety efforts and creates consensus on fire safety among diverse audiences. In California, we are the community-level cooperators implementing the National Fire Plan. We work closely with federal, state and local fire and land management agencies. One of our partnership projects with California Fire Alliance member agencies is a grants clearinghouse that provides a streamlined online grant application process of National Fire Plan grants in California. Thanks to the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, CDF and all members of the Fire Safe Councils that have made this a successful program.

Our local Councils were significantly affected by the wildfires. To the men and women of the fire and land management agencies, we thank you for what you did to stop the fires here in Southern California.

But I'm also here to say that while you put out the big fires, you are in danger of perpetuating the big fires, depending on the decisions you make about your agencies' policies on fire protection and – more importantly – fire prevention and hazard and risk reduction. You are the leaders on these issues and where you go, land planners, citizens and private companies will follow. If you really want to keep this from happening again, then you must get serious about the

community and prevention elements of the National Fire Plan.

Your invitation asked me to comment on a variety of issues: current activities, barriers to success, planning, codes and recommendations. I'll address these from the very personal perspective of people who are flat out afraid of losing their homes to fire. This is not their job, this is their life.

It's the life of people like Ellen Pollema who volunteers in Lytle Creek. Laura Dyberg who volunteers in the Mt. Rim communities. Garrick Lahoda who lives in Idyllwild. Marty Leavitt who lives in San Diego County. And hundreds of other people who run the gamut from retired teachers and business owners to foresters and real estate agents.

None of us wants to lose our homes to fire, but most of us don't do a damned thing about it, even though there is so much we can do. The people I just mentioned should be the rule, but, unfortunately, they are the exception.

As far as California being FIRE SAFE-let's not fool ourselves or anyone else-we have a long way to go.

How do we get there when the state's population is projected to grow to 50 million in the next 16 years, and the fastest developing areas are the wildlands? About 1 million people a year will become Californians, and people are the number one cause of wildfires.

Will we change our approach to land use planning? Will we change where and how people build? And what they are allowed to build with? Will we change how our forests and wildlands are managed? Will we change people's attitudes and actions?

Or will we study the problem, come to some conclusions that reinforce the status quo, publish a report and put it on the shelf for posterity? Although the make-up of the committee, with its focus on firefighting, might give the impression this is the case, you are doing important work that will shape the future of our state. And we trust you will make the right recommendations, just like those who studied the problem before you.

See if this sounds familiar:

For nearly two weeks, uncontrolled flames killed people, consumed hundreds of homes and damaged thousands of other structures. This fire disaster was unique in modern times, primarily in terms of the geographical area involved, the large number of homes completely destroyed, and the large number of agencies, people, and equipment involved. These were days of severe peril and trial to the people of California. It was a time of extreme drought, a time of low humidity, a time of heat, a time of strong, gusty winds. The burned area equaled a strip of land about 1.2 miles wide, stretching diagonally from the Oregon border to the Mexico border. The fires completely destroyed 722 homes as they burned from the hills into the urban communities and

isolated clusters of buildings. Sixteen lives were lost, attributed directly to the fires. During this time, 773 separate wildfires burned nearly 580,000 acres of grass, brush and timber-covered wildlands throughout California. Suppression costs and structural damage together were estimated at \$233 million dollars. The year was 1970.

As a result of the 1970 fire siege, the Secretary of Resources convened a task force to explore the reasons why the fires caused so much damage, develop recommendations to minimize future damage and describe procedures to implement the task force's recommendations.

What came out of that was the incident command system-FIRESCOPE, the implementation statewide of the Red Flag Alert fire weather forecast criteria, and a few area stabs at reducing the use of wood roof coverings.

These were big changes. Now it's up to you to make more changes and implement those changes. We're here to help, the Commission needs to provide the framework that will pave the way to get us to our goal.

Here's what the Fire Safe Councils and others are doing in communities throughout California and some of the challenges we face:

The San Diego County Fire Safe Council was funded by BLM in 2001 for a chipper program and to help spark community participation in prevention programs. The goal of its community participation project was to start 3-5 local

Councils. It was wildly successful. It received interest from more than a dozen areas. Under the Council's brush clearance program, residents called to schedule a chipper to come to their home to chip the brush they cleared and put it back on the spot. The Council was overwhelmed with requests and still can't meet the need. The Council was not funded for this program in 2002.

The Mariposa Fire Safe Council was funded to do a brush clearance program, but not funded for staff positions needed to make the clearance program happen. The Council recently worked with the BLM to modify the brush clearance grant to accommodate staff.

The CREW is a youth employment nonprofit that has cleared more than 12 miles of fuel break in the high priority Ojai Front Fuelbreak system. Cleared vegetation is chipped and distributed to anyone who pulls up a truck and takes a load. They've distributed about 2 tons per Saturday. Local citrus groves have used the chips to mulch their orchards. The CREW receives funding from the BLM and Forest Service. As part of its federal grants, the CREW has had to provide matching funds and has had success in providing in-kind or cash from private sources. The tough economy has hit, however, and it's becoming more challenging for the CREW and other organizations to meet the matching levels set by the funding agencies.

The Butte County Fire Safe Council has led numerous successful fire prevention efforts around the County, many

of them funded by the BLM. Due to decreased funding in California, its latest project was only partially funded.

The California Fire Safe Council receives funding from the BLM, Forest Service and U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. We are experiencing a funding drop of approximately 25% in 2004.

In the burn areas themselves there were victories.

Lytle Creek's defensible space program helped provide defensible space for fire crews on the Grand Prix fire. When a battalion chief's professional judgment told him to pull out his firefighters for their safety, he met unexpected opposition.

Ellen Pollema told me that a U. S. Forest Service firefighter objected, saying, "This community started a Fire Safe Council three years ago. We promised that if they did their part, we'd do ours."

The battalion chief saw the community's work in creating defensible space around homes and brush clearance along roads. He ordered his men back in. The firefighters bravely faced the fire in this neighborhood. Of approximately 350 homes in the Lytle Creek community, only 18 were lost.

In the mountain communities of San Bernardino County, Laura Dyberg told me that the evacuation plan and practices that her council recently helped create paid off.

Many residents were already prepared and evacuated before the order came to leave.

In San Diego County, Lowell Grimaud told me that the decision to select Palomar Observatory as a staging area and shelter, and planning to use local ham radio operators as an information source was critical. He told me that thanks to the Palomar Amateur Radio Club, they had around-the-clock information during the fires.

These are the success stories. As nonprofits, we're businesses. The main source of our revenue is grant funding. Despite our success in delivering our service, our revenue source is drying up. We're taught that success breeds success. Yet in this instance, success may breed bankruptcy.

The groups rely almost totally on funding from federal agencies' discretionary grant programs. They are part of the current strategy to create a fire safe California. And they are bellwethers of the problems facing the current strategy – a strategy that won't work because it is piecemeal and not important enough.

That's why we need big changes, so that we can realize the small successes, like those in Lytle Creek, the San Bernardino Mountains and San Diego County. Because it's the sum of the small success that will create the big victories and help stem the types of fires we just had.

Despite the National Fire Plan, the California Fire Plan, local fire plans, the 100-plus Fire Safe Councils and so on, preventing wildfires is not a priority.

Funding for prevention efforts is down from historic, yet still underfunded levels. Despite the Department of Agriculture budget that increases 2004 National Fire Plan funding \$173 million over 2003, the Forest Service's Community Protection and Economic Action programs have been cut a combined total of approximately 64 percent. (2003 funding: \$5.5 million. 2004 funding: \$2 million.) Yet, the USDA's budget includes the highest level ever requested for fire suppression.

The Bureau of Land Management's 2004 community assistance funding is down 34 percent from 2003. Funding for hazardous fuels reduction overall is flat. Suppression is budgeted to receive a \$35 million dollar increase.

Organizations working in their communities to make them safer from wildfires submitted 299 grant proposals to CDF, BLM and the Forest Service in the past three years. They totaled \$17.3 million. Only \$8.8 million was available to fund projects. Only 50 percent of the need was met. With the new cuts, we are looking at significant failure to meet the need in California. We are going in the wrong direction.

The National Fire Plan created funding for work in wildland-urban interface communities that never existed before and for that we are thankful. The communities rose to meet the challenge in partnership with the agencies. A

support infrastructure of community organizations is in place, but that infrastructure is fragile.

The 10-year Comprehensive Strategy said it, and the agencies continue to say it: “even the best firefighting efforts are not enough without an effective risk reduction strategy.” We’re trying to help develop that strategy, but the rug is being pulled out from under us. Once it’s gone, we’re not likely to step back into the room. If you’re serious about prevention, then act serious. We old-timers remember the days when people would chase us off their lots when we tried to do inspections. Who would have thought so many people are now involved in making those lots fire safe.

We are committed to prevention, and you are our most important partners. You must lead the way on funding.

Federal agencies are under pressure to report successes to Congress. It makes sense. Why fund a program if it’s not being successful? To report successes, you have to have a measurement system. The current emphasis is on treatment of acres. The big question for these funders is, “how many acres are we treating for our grant dollars?” When you compare California to other states, you can understand why we don’t do well in the funding scheme.

We have the largest population in the West, with the most widespread and complex wildland-urban interface in the Nation. It may be a dubious honor, but we created the wildland-urban interface fire problem. In California, we

have to treat small numbers of acres and the cost is higher than in other states. So the acres treated per grant dollar in California is lower than other states. But we provide more protection for the prevention buck because our property values are higher and our communities more densely populated. When it comes to treating high-value wildland-urban interface communities, no other state measures up, yet we are not receiving the needed funding.

The BLM is a significant funder of community efforts in California under the National Fire Plan. If you ask them, they like funding our projects because we get more done for the money we spend. We're treating those acres. But an interesting thing is happening in California. The stuff we cut is growing back. We urge Congress to view maintenance of acres the same way as initial treatment of acres. You can't do a project and drop it; it must be maintained and the agencies must be funded for that -- it's just smart stewardship. Otherwise, why don't we just pave the whole thing. At least that may solve our gridlock problem.

I was once asked by the director of the Department of Finance to show them a fire that CDF prevented via its prevention program as a way to justify the funding level for the program. I told them we prevented 295 fires and asked them to prove it otherwise.

Funding for CDF's statewide mass-media public education campaign was \$400,000 in 1981. It was cut in half soon after and has remained at that level ever since. So for our

34 million people, CDF spends point-0-0-6 cents per person on prevention education. Just when you think the number couldn't get lower, the Department is viewing it as a "nonessential program" to be discontinued. Try telling the Lytle Creek residents whose 332 homes *didn't* burn that it is nonessential. Their Fire Safe Council exists because they learned about Fire Safe Councils through CDF's prevention education program.

Suppression results when prevention fails. If we continue to treat prevention as nonessential, we're doomed to failure in a big way.

Prevention isn't easy or glamorous, but it is cost effective. For every dime spent on prevention, you save a dollar on suppression. So as agencies look for ways to make their suppression programs more cost-effective, we urge them to look toward prevention. It creates safer communities for us and the firefighters. Prevention will keep firefighters in business by giving them a less hazardous environment to work in.

Speaking of environment, another challenge is environmental compliance. The regulatory hoops these volunteers must jump through are killing the enthusiasm.

That said, we know that initial efforts are being made.

Under the California Fire Alliance, agencies are cooperating to better understand how each agency implements environmental compliance regulations. Once

we understand that, the Alliance plans to develop a strategy for easing the compliance process. The president's Healthy Forests Initiative will help, but it's not the only answer. We're confused about NEPA and CEQA. What's the real difference? Do we need to do both? How do we do them? How do we avoid being sued and losing our homes -- not to wildfire -- but to lawsuits? Fire Safe Councils want to do the right thing, but it seems like our safest course may be to do nothing, which means risking the wildfire to avoid the lawsuit.

We recently conducted seven grantwriting training sessions throughout California and we got an earful from a variety of organizations that do fire safety work in their communities. Our recommendations include much of their input. Regarding getting serious about fire prevention, our recommendations are:

- Recognize that this is a significant problem that needs a significant and long-term solution.
- First, fund the need in California. Grant applications for community assistance show \$17.3 million. We're not receiving anywhere near that.
- Create a stable funding infrastructure. Create mandatory grant programs so that organizations that meet certain criteria will be eligible to receive funding. The current system of discretionary grants is confusing and burdensome. There's work to be done, we're willing to do it. Getting the money shouldn't be the hardest and most time-consuming part. Mandatory grants also are an acknowledgement of the long-term nature of the

challenge. Whatever we treat will need to be maintained. We're not just going to be able to treat acres once, pat each other on the back and go home. If we're serious about improving the health of our ecosystems and making our communities safer, then this is a lifelong partnership.

- Block grant community assistance funds to the California Fire Safe Council. We are the delivery mechanism for the California Fire Alliance's one-stop shopping pilot project and the delivery mechanism for community assistance programs in California. We have provided leadership and a consensus-building environment on a tough issue for 10 years; this is our mission and our duty. This concept follows the lead of the incident command system where jurisdictional boundaries are dropped during a fire for the greater good of putting it out. It should be the same way in prevention.
- Create a favorable business climate that will attract the private sector to support prevention efforts. Locating a mill in Southern California is a good first step. We'd also like to see a day when insurance companies see California as a market in which to invest instead of divest. Other thoughts are tax credits for prevention and co-gen plants that provide dollars that are put back into fire prevention efforts.

Our recommendations on environmental compliance are:

- That the California Fire Alliance quickly move from understanding individual agency approaches to developing and implementing more streamlined methods that will enable organizations working at the community level to go through the compliance process in a timely, non-confrontational and easy-to-understand manner.
- That we develop a climate in which pre-fire management, fuels management, vegetation management, or whatever you want to call it, is socially acceptable and demanded. It's a shame that we're killing native species and whole forests because we've been so concerned about preserving them. The California Fire Safe Council met recently with leading environmental organizations in California and we learned that consensus is closer than we think. The devil, of course, is in the details but we have opened the door and we will do our utmost to come away with a roadmap to cooperation.

As I was sitting in traffic to come to this meeting, I cringed at the thought that approximately one million more people are going to be moving into the state every year. I remember responding to fires in Orange County back in the 60s. We'd go to grass fires in the orange groves where Edison Field is.

As the population grows, new cities will pop up and existing communities will be challenged to accommodate the people. We must figure out how to manage this growth from a public safety perspective where fire is just one issue.

Other issues are earthquakes, floods, forest health, invasive species, pests, and the list goes on. Where will we allow construction and what materials will builders use?

The California Fire Safe Council is currently pursuing a voluntary fire safe building certification program. We have received interest from California's building industry for a pilot project, and are talking to the insurance industry, as well as the Fire Marshal's office, about ways we can work together to increase consumers' knowledge of and preference for fire safe homes and communities.

Under the leadership of the California Fire Alliance, almost a dozen FireWise Workshops took place in California to educate communities about fire safe land use planning.

Our recommendations regarding land use planning and codes are:

- Support the California Fire Alliance's initiative to advance FireWise by providing training for those communities that held FireWise Workshops. The next phase will give communities the tools and knowledge they need to implement FireWise principles.
- Continue to emphasize the importance of community fire plans and fund creation of those plans.
- Determine actionable ways communities can manage growth while maintaining or improving public safety and environmental health.

So our vision for a safer California is one where ecosystems are healthier. WUI communities are able to stand on their own in case of fire. Firefighters have the defensible space they need. Prevention efforts are expected and demanded. The work is done at a variety of levels: Agencies are responsible for their jurisdictions. Community efforts are supported by mandatory grants and through the private sector participating because market systems are in place to facilitate it.

As I think about where we want to be and how we will get there, I think of George Washington. Not because he faced the superhuman task of forging a country. But because he had wooden teeth. The advent of modern dentistry came too late for Washington, but not too late for us to take a page from its lesson plan. If we didn't brush our teeth, get annual cleanings, get fillings and do all the other preventive things we do, we'd be like Washington. The entire dental industry was built on prevention. If dentists can do it, so can we. It beats wooden teeth.

A final thought: why is there always enough money to put out the wildfire, but never enough to prevent it?

Thank you.